4/25/88 R8780-1

PRRC emerging trends

mar88

Published by the Princeton Religion Research Center

Vol. 10, No. 3

Many More Today Than in 1986 See Religion Losing Impact on U.S. Life

PRINCETON, N.J. — The number of Americans who think religion is losing its influence on American life has grown sharply since 1986, with 49% now holding this view compared to 39% two years ago. A total of 36% say religion is growing in impact, while 6% see little change.

The sharpest change between the 1986 (Sept.) and 1988 (March) surveys in those saying "losing" is found among younger adults and Protestants.

The question and national findings for 1986 and 1988 are:

At the present time, do you think religion as a whole is increasing its influence on American life or losing its influence?

Influence of Religion

	1986	1988
Increasing	48%	36%
Losing	39	49
Staying the same (Volunteered)	6	6
No opinion	7	9
	100%	100%

When this index was started in 1957, 69% said religion was gaining influence on American life while far fewer, 14%, said losing. By 1969 the figures were reversed. Between 1969 and 1985, however, a steady upturn was noted in those who said religion was increasing its influence.

Following is the long-term trend, with the proportions saying "the same" or "no opinion" excluded:

	Increasing	Losing
	%	%
1988	36	49
1986	48	39
1985	49	39
1984	42	39
1983	44	42
1981	38	46
1980	35	46
1978	37	48
1977	36	45
1976	44	45
1975	39	51
1974	31	56
1970	14	75
1969	14	70
1968	18	67
1967	23	57
1965	33	45
1962	45	31
1957	69	14

The latest results are based on 1,003 telephone interviews with adults, 18 and older, conducted during the period March 8-12, 1988.

Protestants Tend to Be Older, Catholics Younger

A detailed analysis of religious preference by age groups, based on 1987 Gallup surveys, brings these major points to light:

- The percentage of Protestants in the general population is higher among those 30 years old or older than it is among those under the age of 30. The reverse trend is true for Catholics.
- The percentage of Jews is fairly stable throughout the age groups, as is the case with persons who say their religious preference is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).
- A slightly higher proportion of teen-agers than adults name a religious preference other than a major faith.
- The percentage of Americans who say they have no religious preference peaks in the 18-to-24 age group, declining steadily throughout the ensuing years.

The table below is based on telephone interviews with 1,518 teen-agers in Gallup Youth Surveys conducted during 1987, and personal and telephone interviews with 14,147 adults in Gallup Polls.

The question:

What is your religious preference — Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Morman, or an Eastern Orthodox Church, such as the Russian or Greek Orthodox Church?

Religious Preference in the United States
(by age groups)

	Protestant %	Catholic %	Jewish %	Latter-day Saints %	Eastern Orthodox %	Other %	None %
13-15 years	51	32	2	3	*	5	7
16-17 years	54	26	3	4	*	5	8
18-24 years	49	31	1	3	*	2	14
25-29 years	50	32	2	2	*	2	12
30-49 years	56	27	2	2	*	2	11
50-64 years	63	26	3	2	*	1	5
65 and older	66	24	2	2	*	1	5

* Less than 1%.

Local Congregations: A Key Resource for the Nation's Future

By Nicholas B. van Dyck
President, Religion In American Life

It is good to learn that religious organizations are again at the top of the list of institutions in which Americans place their confidence, according to a recent Gallup Poll.

Another Gallup survey finds that 40 percent of Americans attend a church or synagogue "every week"or "almost every week." That's good to know, but where is the rest of America? Congregations are eager to welcome them. Growth in a shared faith awaits them. Furthermore, businesses and other institutions in society value the kind of people who participate in the life of a congregation. The nation needs more of them.

What happens in congregations is vitally important to all of society. Why? It is very simple. People in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, and Protestant congregations know that rewarding purpose and true happiness come through enjoying faith in God within communities where worship, fellowship, and service are the hallmarks of what happens. These people know a many-splendored variety of heritages and hopes. They also know that quality of life — measured by productivity, compassion, justice, and shared commitment to a worthwhile future — depends on faith in God that blossoms into respect for others, belief in oneself, and a lively moral sensibility. Choices are made every day between conniving and candor, exploitation and fairness, me first or we first. And where in this land does faith in God grow beyond mere private piety into lively shared experiences that give larger-than-self meaning to each of these choices? It's the up-front agenda in every congregation where worship, Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and service link faith with practice, reverence with joy.

There has been much talk about another kind of religion in recent weeks — religion on television. What is the best approach for religion to use in capitalizing on the power of TV?

First the good news. Most people who watch religious television also worship with a congregation.

More good news. Religion In American Life, an organization serving religions of every major tradition in the United States, uses television for a special purpose — to encourage nation-wide audiences to become actively involved in the church or synagogue of their choice. This approach makes good sense from the standpoint of individuals who want to break out of lonely, self-sustained piety. It also makes good sense from the standpoint of the public interest.

However, when religious television fails to emphasize the fundamental significance of participation within a community of faith, then some questions must be asked.

My mother used to keep me enlightened about the straight and narrow by quoting scripture. One of her favorites was, "By their fruits ye shall know them." Let's take a look at some religious television enterprises and — apart from their vital role in reaching the unchurched with a message of hope, and encouraging participation in a church or synagogue — compare their fruits with those of denominations with foundations in local congregations.

Six of the top television religious enterprises (Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, 700 Club, Richard deHaan, James Robison, and Larry Jones) have total weekly audiences roughly equal to the membership of two Protestant denominations (United Church of Christ and Christian Church, Disciples of Christ). The six televangelist groups expend $384 million each year and support five colleges and schools, five health-related services and hospitals, a small amount of mission work, the TV ministry organizations themselves, and two congregations.

Such activities are certainly to be applauded, but it should also be noted that the two denominations report total giving of $787 million and support 19 seminaries, 48 colleges, 350 overseas missionaries (including teachers, doctors, and other professionals), 115 hospitals and other health and welfare institutions, and 10,665 congregations. These two denominations, when compared to the six televangelists' enterprises, give over twice as much and support over 600 times as many institutions that meld faith with practice, and in so doing reach out to meet human need and serve the public interest. It is clear that the right mix for religion and television is found where messages encourage folk to move beyond couch-potatoe piety and get to where there is prayer and study in fellowship, worship, and faithful service.

Yes. What about faith measured by compassion, justice, productivity, and a commitment to a worthwhile future? What about the public interest? Religion that comes alive in local congregations makes all the difference.

Can Mr. Gallup give America a better than 40% report next year? Let's see what we can do.

Nicholas B. van Dyck

Nicholas B. van Dyck is president of Religion In American Life. He was formerly president of the National Council for Families and Television. Dr. van Dyck,a Presbyterian minister who has served parishes in the United States and Great Britain, is a graduate of Rutgers University, Union Theological Seminary (New York) and holds a Ph.D. from the University of St. Andrews (Scotland) in theology and cultural anthropology focused on communications and the shaping of culture.

Half of Teens Are Regular Attendees of Religious Services

For the majority of American teens, the activities of a typical weekend include attending religious services, according to the results of the latest Gallup Youth Survey.

More than half — 52 percent — of the surveyed teens said they attended church or synagogue services during the seven-day period preceding the interview. Church attendance among teens is higher in the South (62 percent) and Midwest (51 percent) — the regions sometimes referred to as the Bible Belt — than it is in the East (46 percent) and West (45 percent).

The survey also reveals that black teens are more likely to have recently attended religious services than are white teens, by a margin of 68 percent to 49 percent.

Young women (54 percent) are more likely to have attended services than are young men (49 percent), and teens from white-collar households are more frequent attenders than are those from blue-collar families, by a margin of 56 percent to 48 percent.

As teens grow older they are less likely to attend services. Among those 13 to 15, more than half (56 percent) say they went to religious services last week. But among those who are 16 or older, attendance drops to less than half (46 percent).

Surveys by Gallup among adults in recent years show that 40 percent of the adult population are likely to attend religious services in an average week. Although teens more often attend services than adults do, it should be remembered that the parents of some young people may require them to attend.

Teens are more likely to claim preference for one of the Protestant denominations (52 percent) than for the Roman Catholic faith (30 percent). The ratio of Protestants to Roman Catholics, however, is closer among teens than it is among adults, where Protestants outnumber Catholics by a margin of 59 percent to 27 percent. In addition, 3 percent each prefer the Jewish faith or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and one teen in 20 (5 percent) prefers some other denomination or faith. Only 7 percent of the teens say they have no religious preference.

Catholic teens are found most often in the East (43 percent), while Protestants prevail in the South (72 percent).

It is important to bear in mind that these Gallup audits focus upon religious preference and not upon membership. Preference as reported by the respondents could understate membership in some instances, such as the Catholic Church, which considers its adherents to be members from birth.

Here is how the questions were asked:

Did you attend religious services in a church or synagogue during the last seven days?

What is your religious preference — Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, or other?

Preference and Attendance

	Protestant	Catholic	Attended church last week
	%	%	%
NATIONAL	52	30	52
Male	51	30	49
Female	54	29	54
Ages 13 to 15	51	32	56
Ages 16 to 17	54	26	46
Whites	50	32	49
Blacks	77	8	68
White-collar family background	50	32	56
Blue-collar family background	54	27	48
East	41	43	46
Midwest	49	34	51
South	72	17	62
West	41	28	45
Central cities	48	36	49
Suburbs	45	31	52
Non-metropolitan	49	26	53
Adults	59	27	40

Religion Least Important to New Englanders

Among residents of the eight major sections of the nation, New Englanders rate religion least important. Residents of the Southeastern United States rate it highest.

Freedom of religion was a key factor in bringing the first European settlers — the Puritans — to New England. Today, that freedom of religion is still highly valued by the region's present inhabitants. Compared to other Americans, people from New England show a higher tolerance for beliefs and lifestyles they do not personally share. Religion itself, however, is not so highly important. In fact, the region is characterized by its general lack of religiousness. Forty percent of New Englanders, compared with 25% of adults nationally, rate a '1' on a four-point scale measuring strength of religious faith.

Here is the table based on a factor analysis which characterized respondents on five key dimensions of religious faith:

Religious Faith	Total	New Eng.	Mid Atl.	East Cent.	West Cent.	South East	South West	Rocky Mt.	Pacific
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1 — Low	25	40	29	26	23	17	18	24	36
2	26	29	26	30	29	24	21	27	22
3	25	16	22	25	25	29	29	29	20
4 — High	24	15	23	19	23	30	32	20	22

(From a TIMES MIRROR survey of 4,244 U.S. adults, 18 and older, conducted by The Gallup Organization, April/May, 1987. New England includes: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.)

Confidence in the Church Among British Down from '85

Confidence in the Church has slipped among the British over the last three years. Forty-five percent in a recent survey say they have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the Church, compared to 56 percent in the 1985 survey.

The results reported here are based on a national survey conducted by Social Surveys (Gallup Poll), (Nov.-Dec., 1987) London.

Here is the question.

How much confidence do you have in the Church — a great deal, quite a lot, not very much, or none at all?

Here are the results:

Great deal	17%
Quite a lot	28
Not very much	36
None at all	17
Don't know	2
	100%

Results from a similar question asked by The U.S. Gallup Poll show a modest decline in confidence in the Church or organized religion over the last three years. In a July, 1987 survey, 61% of Americans said they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in this institution. The comparable figure in 1985 was 66%.

Can Religion Answer World Problems?

A majority of Americans (57%) hold the belief that religion can answer all or most of today's problems, while 20% disagree. Another 23% are undecided. The current percentage saying religion can answer problems statistically matches the 1986 finding, but represents a marginal decline from the 61% recorded in 1985. The current figure, however, is far below the peak figure in 1957, when fully 81% said religion could answer the problems of the world.

Following is the trend:

Can Religion Answer Problems?

	Can Answer	Out of date	No opinion
	%	%	%
1988	57	20	23
1986	57	23	20
1985	61	22	17
1984	56	21	23
1982	60	22	18
1981	65	15	20
1974	62	20	18
1957	81	7	12

Most inclined to believe that religion can answer today's problems are women, blacks, persons 50 and older, Southerners, and evangelicals.

Following is the question:

Do you believe that religion can answer all or most of today's problems, or that religion is largely old-fashioned and out of date?

The current findings are based on telephone interviews with 1,003 adults, 18 and older, conducted in scientifically selected localities across the nation during the period March 8-12. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be 4 percentage points in either direction.

In addition to sampling error, the reader should bear in mind that question wording and other practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

EMERGING TRENDS is published monthly except July and August by the PRINCETON RELIGION RESEARCH CENTER. The Center, founded in 1977, is an inter-faith non-denominational research organization with headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey. The PRRC specializes in creative, actionable research, utilizing the worldwide attitudinal and behavioral facilities of Gallup International. The purpose of the PRRC is to gain a better understanding of the nature and depth of religious commitment in the U.S. and abroad and to explore ways this information can enable religious leaders to promote spiritual growth. A one-year subscription can be obtained for $30.00. Inquire: **Publications Department, P.O. Box 310, 53 Bank Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08542 (Telephone 609/924-9600). PLEASE NOTIFY US OF ADDRESS CHANGE.**

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